

Between 1957 and 1961, Columbia's microphones at Philadelphia's Broadwood Hotel captured Rudolf Serkin and Eugene Ormandy with The Philadelphia Orchestra in four landmark concerto recordings. Together they set down Brahms's two monumental piano concertos and the youthful concertos of Mendelssohn – performances that remain central documents of mid-century interpretation. Newly restored in Pristine's remasterings, they exemplify the fusion of artistry, orchestral polish, and the vivid early stereo sound of Columbia's golden era.

By the late 1950s Serkin (1903–1991) was recognised as one of the foremost pianists of his age. Born in Bohemia, trained in Vienna, and long associated with violinist Adolf Busch, he had settled in the United States in 1939 and soon became a central figure in American musical life, notably at the Marlboro Festival. His playing was renowned for intellectual rigour and uncompromising integrity, qualities that come through powerfully in these concertos.

Brahms's First Concerto in D minor, Op. 15, recorded on 10 December 1961, is among the most symphonic of all piano concertos. Originally conceived as a symphony, then a two-piano sonata, it emerged as a turbulent work of youthful intensity. Serkin's reading is taut and dramatic, never indulgent. The orchestral introduction, shaped by Ormandy with controlled tension, leads to a piano entry that joins the conflict rather than dominates it. The Adagio unfolds with prayer-like simplicity, while the finale drives forward with muscular energy and iron discipline.

The Second Concerto in B-flat major, Op. 83, taped on 4 April 1960, expands the form into four movements and nearly fifty minutes of music – a "symphony with piano obbligato." From the opening horn call and piano's sweeping arpeggios, Serkin balances grandeur with intimacy. The scherzo's muscular drive, the slow movement's glowing cello solo, and the exuberant finale are unified by his command of structure and sound. The Philadelphia strings, famous for their warmth and sheen, provide an ideal cushion for this expansive interpretation.

Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto in G minor, Op. 25, was recorded on 19 December 1957. Compact and fleet, its three movements run without pause. Serkin invests the glittering passagework with meaning rather than display, while Ormandy ensures the orchestra's agility and freshness. The lyrical Andante is phrased with simplicity, leading into a finale of dazzling precision and clarity.

The Second Concerto in D minor, Op. 40, captured on 8 October 1959, is slightly larger in scale but equally youthful in spirit. The fiery opening is dispatched with brilliance, followed by a tender slow movement and a finale whose playful rondo theme is delivered with irresistible buoyancy. Serkin demonstrates that he could bring the same integrity to lighter repertoire as to the Germanic monuments for which he was best known.

Eugene Ormandy's contribution is vital throughout. Music director of The Philadelphia Orchestra from 1936 to 1980, he maintained the ensemble's famous luxuriant sonority while adding discipline and clarity. Here he proves a model collaborator: supportive without subservience, shaping orchestral textures to match Brahms's symphonic breadth and Mendelssohn's chamber-like interplay alike.

Together these four concertos chart a fascinating trajectory, from Mendelssohn's early Romantic sparkle to Brahms's monumental maturity. They also represent Columbia's stereo recording at its finest – spacious, detailed, and now revealed in Pristine's vivid restorations. For Serkin, they were milestones in a long and distinguished career, interpretations in which intellect, passion, and integrity converge. Six decades on, their vitality remains undimmed.



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BRAHMS AND MENDELSSOHN PIANO CONCERTOS
SERKIN, THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA, ORMANDY

serkin four piano concertos

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BRAHMS AND MENDELSSOHN PIANO CONCERTOS
SERKIN, THE PHILADELPHIA ORCHESTRA, ORMANDY

disc one (64:02)

BRAHMS Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor, Op. 15

- 1 1st mvt. - Maestoso (20:25)
- 2 2nd mvt. - Adagio (12:43)
- 3 3rd mvt. - Rondo. Allegro non troppo (11:23)

Recorded 10 December 1961

MENDELSSOHN Piano Concerto No. 1 in G minor, Op. 25

- 4 1st mvt. - Molto allegro con fuoco (6:52)
- 5 2nd mvt. - Andante (6:27)
- 6 3rd mvt. - Presto - Molto Allegro e vivace (6:12)

Recorded 19 December 1957

XR remastering by Andrew Rose

Cover artwork based on a
photograph of Rudolf Serkin

Stereo recordings made by
Columbia Records at the
Broadwood Hotel,
Philadelphia

Total duration: 2hr 15:00

disc two (70:58)

BRAHMS Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 83

- 1 1st mvt. - Allegro non troppo (17:16)
- 2 2nd mvt. - Allegro appassionato (8:49)
- 3 3rd mvt. - Andante (12:39)
- 4 4th mvt. - Allegretto grazioso (9:31)

Recorded 4 April 1960

MENDELSSOHN Piano Concerto No. 2 in D minor, Op. 40

- 1 1st mvt. - Allegro appassionata (8:35)
- 2 2nd mvt. - Adagio. Molto sostenuto (8:06)
- 3 3rd mvt. - Finale. Presto scherzando (6:01)

Recorded 8 October 1959

Rudolf Serkin, piano
The Philadelphia Orchestra
conducted by Eugene Ormandy

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